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ABSTRACT

A new theoretical paradigm for teaching writing and organizing composition research was at hand by 1982, focusing on how writers write and the practice of interventionist teaching. Today, the process theory of teaching composition dominates the field, yet it has not shifted teaching practices or research questions toward the settings and assumptions inherent in "actual" contemporary acts of writing. Research shows, for example, that traditional orientations toward the product are still widely popular. Among process theories, the product is often viewed as the only measure of process, and categories of writers are traditional and based on the produced texts. The status of composition studies, however, has been radically reformulated into a science, and its object has become the status and practices of legitimate researchers and teachers. Despite the massive theorizing, both texts and students are subjected to fundamentally formalist interpretations, and basic assumptions remain the same. Writing is still broadly categorized as either good or bad, reflecting the enduring model of historical evaluation. Various critics, embracing Marxist theories, have argued that historically, the study of English has presented a unified moral pedagogy whose object has been to monitor and evaluate a social class called "students." In this view, composition is a domain of regulated interventions into the lives of a population for purposes of regulation. Thus, whether according to product or process approaches, students remain unliberated, and continue to think of themselves as "not good at English." (HB)

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Susan Miller

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Susan Miller

The Disciplinary Processing of Writing-As-Process

I'd like to begin with what I hope you will take to be a parodic summary of "process theory": "Take lots of time. Don't spend all of it, but do spend some of it, working alone. Talk to others, asking for help in more than one way. Make many changes. Focus on readers. Practice." My students, no slouches, usually respond to their initial exposure to these principles with "oh no, groups again." They are, that is, products of "process" teaching in their high schools, and used to revisions. They then want to know how I will grade them.

I provide these 6 sentences and typical student responses to them to set off a discussion of their discursive foundation, the "process," and the "product," theories that make current explanations of composition teaching intelligible, and that are commonly identified as sequential moves in a history of established composition theory. Ten years ago, Maxine Hairston's "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," said that the primary value of establishing the new paradigm of "process" in composition studies was to provide a space for systematically discovering and describing how actual writers write (85). This model, she argues, led teachers away from analyses of the product of composition, student essays, and encouraged them to intervene during the process of writing, when actual benefits could result. Hairston's case for opposing "product" (or "current traditional") teaching to "process" teaching derives from work by earlier theorists, especially Janet Emig, Gilbert Rohman and Albert

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Wilecke, and Mina Shaughnessy. In The Composing Process of Twelfth-Graders (1971), Emig explained that many student texts are wooden because the teaching of writing relied on descriptions of the written text (the product of writing), not on observations of how writers write. She theorized that writing is a recursive process, not a linear transcription of ideas already in mind. But Hairston says that Shaughnessy's work on basic writers and the logic with which they approximate standard graphic representations made her the field's "essential person .who asked [the essential] question" (82).

It apppears that a new theoretical "paradigm" for teaching writing and organizing composition research was at hand in 1982, when Hairston described the field in Kuhn's terms, as technically "pre-paradigmatic." The "field"-- which subsequent writers began to describe as a field-- had a new question, had available means to investigate this problem, and had a new practice based on answers to this question. It asked "how do writers write?," investigated with controled observations and systematic textual analyses, and began to practice what was and is called interventionist teaching. As a "theory for teaching writing," foundations in "process" described positive interruptions that could replace an earlier focus on marking errors and infelicities in already-written student texts. This theory created, in these views, a dominant model for the act of writing that we could use and continue to elaborate conceptually.

All of these benefits certainly apply in what we have said publically about teaching practices. The 90 model programs that comprise the contents of the 1978 Options for the Teaching of Writing, the 1986 New Directions in College Writing Programs, and Carol Hartzog's 1986 Composition in the Academy, all published by the Modern Language Association, openly claim their use of this process theory for teaching. Lester Faigley and others further place process teaching in a meta-perspective. In "Competing Theories of Process," Faigley compares three categories of process theory--"expressive," "cognitive," and "social" emphases that variously describe the perfomance of writers. His account brings to mind such names as Murray, Bruffee, Flower and Hayes, Elbow, Bartholomae, Bizzell, and Bazerman, who have written textbooks and widely recognized articles that theorize teaching. Faigley asserts that we may assume "the recognition of the study of writing as an important area of research within English" (527) and, like Stephen North in The Making of Knowledge in Composition, uses classifications to define "schools" and professional groups on which such status depends. James Berlin, in "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," similarly classifies cognitive, expressive, and social-epistemic rhetorics that, he thinks, organize three distinct ideological approaches to teaching.

But it is important to notice some flaws in the cool progress of this description. Separating two forms of composition teaching historically and oppositionally, as "product" before and versus

"process," suggests that two "grand theories" have sequentially controlled the teaching of writing. Yet if a claim is made that a new theory replaces an old one, it is fair to ask how the communities representing each one interacted, whether the problem engaged by the earlier group was "shifted" in the latter's address to a different problem, and how extensive the change accomplished actually was. Precisely what sort of changes comprise the movement that Hairston and her followers have summarized? Why did Donald Gray review the articles he had published after his editorship of College English ended in 1986 with the comment that "when I was told that I was living in a paradigm shift, I didn't feel the earth move" (150)?

It is obvious that the extent of a perceived shift from a "currrent traditional product analysis" to teaching based on process research must be qualified by fairly common knowledge. The traditionalism of what most teachers still actually do is verified in Richard Larson's Ford-sponsored research describing actual teaching practices across the country. And this traditional orientation toward the "product," toward correcting the final text, still emerges in the topics of best-selling textbooks, and in significantly better-selling handbooks and workbooks. Most have added process-based techniques to traditional topics and methods. The process paradigm has evidently not "solved" a "problem" that most teachers of composition perceived as a problem, for the teaching that Hairston claims has changed does not universally, nor even consensually, throw over its old methods with anything like the sureity that made

telescopes and microscopes normal tools for astronomers and biologists.

Students are not, that is, usually treated in composition classrooms as Hairston's "actual writers," with their own practices that warrant description before they are expanded or changed. In many courses, students read and analyze texts quite distinct from those that they read and write in "actual" situations. They usually write generic "essays" that have only a metaphorical relation to the genres that constitute their actual writing experiences. And as the students I encounter say, they still normally, and accurately, expect a teacher's standards, not the effectiveness of their writing in particular situations, to determine evaluations of this writing.

But more significantly for our purposes, when we examine actual "theories" of process, we find ways that the earth did not move so much or in precisely the ways that were claimed. In many descriptions of writing processes, the written text is still taken as the only measure of processes, not the actual activities of its writer. Studies of student writing processes, or of changes in them outside controlled "process" classrooms, have not replaced studies that focus on textual features. And in the observational process research that does highlight the "activities of writers," evaluations of texts measure how well or poorly a student emulates the processes of the "experienced" and "professional" writers who are taken to be models. Categories of writers still follow traditions that distinguished "good" from "bad" texts, categories now shifted,

to compare "experienced" or "professional" with "unprepared" or "inexperienced" writers. This emphasis has also retained the "current traditional" belief that writers control, or with proper instruction can learn to control, a single "meaning" that all readers will perceive identically. Students in most composition courses are expected to be or learn to be "clear," just as current-traditionalists about language claimed they could be.

In sum, neither process teaching nor process research is generally undertaken to verify a new, normalizing theory based on a revolutionary idea that set a particularly new set of problems or modes of perception for the field. But equally important, there is little evidence that process theory produces teaching practices, or that it contains specific formal principles, that actively compete with an earlier set of organized practices and concepts. The pointedly evaluative principle that organized a "product" paradigm and most of its current-traditional methods have been silently retained in practice. And articulating this supposedly defunct "theory" has relied on its (supposed) opponents, who created it as theory when their own "process" theory was first defined.

Consequently, we can ask of composition theory what it has accomplished. If its process theory did not decisively shift teaching practices or radically redirect the field's research questions toward the settings and assumptions inherent in "actual" contemporary acts of writing, what great benefit has it had? We might turn these questions to Robert Connors's article, "Composition Studies and

Science," which appeared soon after Hairston's "Winds of Change." Connors recognized a special relation between Hairston's assertions and the making of theories in specific empowering circumstances. He focused on Hairston's argument that composition studies is a "scientific or pre-scientific"(5) field that should describe itself in the language of "paradigm" and "pre-paradigmatic" to invoke the substance and status of science. Connors looked not at the content of this theory, or at its successes and failures in "problem-solving," but at its status as a discourse. His critique argued that an established member of the composition teaching profession had asserted to her peers that they could change their past sense of inadequacy by comparing their new work to a "*scientific* revolution." This change, from practice to "science," depended on stating that new interventions in writing-in-process were valid methods and thus would produce a male-coded "research."

This message from process theory was, most certainly, heard. With none of the reservations about actual change that I have described, Hairston's peers adopted the line of her argument. They asserted that formerly ad hoc practices whose principles remained unarticulated, but that shared the history of literary studies' creation of "good" and "bad" texts, had changed into a disciplinary enterprise, with distinct and contesting "branches" described by Faigley, North, and Berlin. Newly identified Composition Specialists encouraged recognition of this field, sought and received grants and book contracts, and were enabled to award new degrees in

"composition/rhetoric" or "composition studies." Their departmental colleagues heard their claims, especially in the dual context of the "new" national literacy crisis declared after the Vietnamese war, which newly defined "literacy" to encompass technical skills related to the computer, and in what amounted to a freeze on positions for literary scholars. With limited responsiveness, formerly disinterested colleagues recognized "the field." They acknowledged its members as legitimately concerned with student writing, which had become a new, re-formed "problem," with a new solution close at hand. Its theory legitimated its existence, just as currently unmasked claims for literary "theory" empower its recent competition for recognition with philosophy.

Process theory, that is, took as its tacit object neither the text nor the act of writing, but the status and practices of those who taught, which had previously been culturally and professionally blurred in a figure of an authoritarian mother. It drew attention to these teaching practices and improved, by male-gendering, the status of those who engaged in contact with messy student thinking. Given new status, a broad range of composition theorists rewrote diverse aspects of their formerly unorganized practice. Some created an elitist History of rhetorical personages and their influences that avoids the many historical writing situations that all "students" have encountered, including those who were lower-class, women, or minority writers outside privileged academic settings. Other, "Cognitive" theorists took as their object of study

the totalized mind of the writer engaged in writing. They isolated the writer as a traditional Cartesian "subject," who is assumed to control absolutely (or to fail to control) a meaning sought only within a "text itself." Another group, "Rhetorical" theorists, examined imagined "audiences" for texts, taking as their object of study a similarly fixed psychology of interactions between an individual and a traditionally imagined "universal" yet well-defined group. But none, finally, redefined basic assumptions about what writing is, about its contemporary purposes, about how courses in contemporary acts of writing might fit these purposes, or about the social and institutional situations of students who write.

I am suggesting in this sketchy survey that much articulated composition theory, whatever we say, appears to retain an image of student writing instruction as an initiative, evaluative rite. Invitations to the gatherings where "ongoing conversations" take place in now entirely literate disciplines will, with this theory, be earned through the generic practices of a developing generic writer, who writes generic essays. The "written language" that is the ostensible concern of composition teaching is not made intelligible as a "process" itself-- as an action or as a resulting text that approximates meaning in interactions among an only temporarily, temporally, linguistically-positioned writers, ad hoc readers, and specific, variable discourse situations.

Consequently, in much of the composition theory that we now display in textbooks, teaching colloquia, and program descriptions,

both texts and "minds" are subjected to fundamentally formalist interpretations. Such formalism attempts to expose essentially stable meanings that are hidden or distorted in peculiarly student texts. Writing itself still is most frequently treated as potentially transparent, a pipeline of direct actions or clear graphics that transmits the personal presence of a quite literally imagined authorial "voice," arising from a stable, unified, coherent human subject. This voice will be heard (or not) by an equally stable, unified, and purposeful "audience." We do not ordinarily imagine writing, nor teach it, as though it is read by a widely scattered, often isolated readership who do not know and often will not meet its human source. To use the language of visual representation, we have largely retained Realism as our practical model for both theory and teaching.

I am aware that many composition theorists significantly oppose these assumptions. But I am arguing primarily that the object that we have theorized remains fairly opaque because it still resides in the unarticulated but indominable categories of "high" and "low" that first defined all academic textual studies. Well after the creation of a paradigm for composition <u>studies</u>, its theory-writing has not resulted in practical challenges to early principles that described the nature, form, or purpose of writing practices. We have not genuinely questioned our evaluative assumptions and actual practices in teaching. "Actual writing" remains hidden in generic images of it as "good" or "bad" that were more appropriate in a

stratified, high-literate culture whose unself-conscious claims on class entitlements have passed. We unfortunately theorize "writing" as the inadequacies of most entering students as against a canon of "good writing" and an equally rigid model of certain communication.

Were I Paul deMan, I might here begin to describe this disciplinary situation as a resistance to theory. But I would rather conclude by exposing a historical perspective on both product and process theory, to explain agendas that encourage"process" teaching as the partner of evaluative attention to "product." These agendas have, in fact, been in place since the 19th-century beginnings of "English" as a discipline that encompasses and divides both literary, "high," and student, "low," texts. Our two-headed evaluative model for the "low," our product/process, tweedle de-dum, has a specific historic origin in the colonizing principles in which English studies was born. These principles, the pedagogy of English, constitute the enduring model of evaluation that defines both product and process.

Specifically, as Ian Hunter, Terry Eagleton, and many other historians of our discipline are currently explaining, the study of English was established at historically identifiable political moments in Europe and America, to isolate and create a new class identity, built specifically for new student participants in new, mass education. Like Eagleton in "The Subject of Literature," Hunter argues in Culture and Government that this new pedagogical technology has been precisely moral. It centralized a language curriculum that was, and is still, comprised of four emphases:

information about language in rhetoric and philology, a simultaneously analytical and self-"critical" sensibility, an illusion of "freedom" in closely monitored self-expression, and particularly a special teacher, decribed in one 1850 document as a friend and confidant:

> It is necessary that [the teacher] place himself on such terms with his pupils as that they can, without fear, make him their confidant, unburden their minds, and tell him any little story, or michievous occurence. Teachers and parents, [to gain] the confidence of their children, must in fact, themselves, as it were, bcome children, by bending to, and occasionally engage in, their plays and amusements. Without such condescension, a perfect knowledge of real character and dispositions cannot be obtained. (Stow, 156; qtd Hunter, 126)

Hunter elaborates on how modern literary education instantiated this strikingly familiar teacherly personae in an educational culture of "self criticism," the covert "humane" theme of "process" teaching and of the socialized "group work" that its processed students now expect. But as though he were watching David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow debate, Hunter's stresses that this self-critical culture requires oscillation between two cooperative modes: formalist categories of analysis like those we call "conventions" in both product and process theory, and an opposing standard, the immediate "experience" and "feeling" of the student that also informs both product and process models. This unified moral pedagogical

technology monitors and evaluates a social class, called "students." By assuring a sense of individual inadequacy as against the "correct" or "experienced" actions associated with process, and against the "correct" and "critical" texts associated with product, both of these theories and all their teachers assure that Hairston's "actual writing of actual writers" will come under the purview of institutionally formed self-judgments. That is, the production of "English" to regulate a new class required that pedagogy inject the institution of education itself into popular social registers, especially into the written language of a majority who attend college. "'Literature'," Hunter says, "is not deployed as a philological document registering the motley of cultural technologies, [but] is instead predominantly deployed as an ethical device inside one such techology: the supervisory apparatus of modern pedagogy" (258). Were Hunter American, he might also say that composition theory and composition teaching are not deployed as ways of describing and encouraging actual writing practices, but as forms of investigation and administration. In his language, much like our own, composition is a domain of regulated *interventions* in the life of the population" (263). In other words, English, as constituted by a dual critical sensibility, textual objects, and a teacher, comprises an "intervention in the life of the population" that may be identified with either product or process theory. In judging students' written texts as products, we assumed that they revealed the so-called thoughts of "individual" students, expressions of our values, visible

in so-called critical ability. But with process theory, actual behavior, not just "any little story, or michievous occurence," is additionally exposed to analysis and self-criciticsm. In the field of English conceived as this modern pedagogy, "current traditional" theory has been a power to implement an isolated, sensitive, socially alienated consciousness that (privately) reads and (inconsequentially) writes. But to imagine that we have liberated, exposed the power relations around, or fostered the sociability of language in any branch of process theory or teaching does not remove either from the apparatus for self-criticism that was its basis. Process theory has promoted a kinder, gentler mode of "intervention," of which it is quite proud, but this intervention is largely kinder and gentler to those who deploy it professionally, to authorize their status as professionals in hierarchies that imitate ranks among their literary and current-traditional forebears. But as they are either produced in product theory or processed by process theory, our students still tend to believe--against all logic, but with excellent culturalist reasoning about pedagogical history--that they are "not good at English."